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Navy Backs Up Ship's Captain on Role Off Cuba

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 4— The American vessel that broke down and drifted into Cuban waters last week, causing the aircraft carrier Nimitz to be dispatched to the area, was gathering hydrographic information along the coast of Haiti before developing engine trouble, Navy officials said today.

The officials denied that the vessel, the Seaward Explorer, owned by Seaward Services of Miami, was on a covert intelligence mission. The sudden dispatch of the 95,000-ton Nimitz to rescue the 105-foot Seaward Explorer has set off rumors to that effect in Washington and elsewhere.

Pentagon officials said later that the Nimitz had been dispatched to dissuade the Cubans from taking hostages. But naval officers suggested privately that the dispatch of the Nimitz was a political overreaction that amounted to little more than shaking a stick at Cuba.

Subsidiary of Honeywell

The Seaward Explorer had been hired by Tetra Tech, a company in Pasadena, Calif., that is a subsidiary of Honeywell, a leading military contractor with headquarters in Minneapolis. Tetra Tech is under contract to the Navy for the Haitian coastal survey.

A spokesman for Tetra Tech, reached in Pasadena, declined to comment and referred questions to Honeywell, where a spokesman said: "As far as the Seaward Explorer is concerned, we're under contract to do a hydrographic survey. That's all I can tell you."

Under earlier Navy contracts, Tetra Tech has worked on communication systems for undersea warfare. The company has also done marine surveys for Saudi Arabia and provided engineering to develop Oman's oil and mineral resources.

Under the contract for the survey around Haiti, Naval officials said, Tetra Tech gathered data along the northern and southern coasts and in the Gulf of Gonaives on depths and tides, and took water samples to calibrate the speed of sound in the water.

The speed of sound, which is determined by temperature, salinity and layers of seawater, would affect sonar operations by aircraft, surface vessels and submarines. It would also affect communications with submarines from whatever source.

Haiti, the western portion of the island of Hispaniola, which it shares with the Dominican Republic, is across the Windward Passage from Cuba, site of the United States naval base at Guantánamo.

The contract, which Navy officials said Tetra Tech won in open bidding, is for the fixed price of \$349,968 and became effective last April 13.

The officials said the Haitian coast was being surveyed because the last such study was done in the nineteenth century.

Naval officers said many charts of the Caribbean, including those for

waters around Grenada, were far out of date. Military officers who took part in the invasion of that island last year have complained about inadequate intelligence.

A copy of the contract with Tetra Tech shows that it was required to hire a vessel owned, registered and operated by Americans and stipulated that "the survey vessel shall comply with U.S. Coast Guard regulations for safe operation of vessels of its class."

Tetra Tech, a medium-sized company, specializes in studies of ocean movements and their effects on harbors, oil rigs and nuclear plants. It has also developed underwater cameras and other equipment for undersea operations.